

What We Carry

There is a story about a monk who became enlightened. According to the story, there was a young man that was curious about how life changes once one becomes enlightened. In order to get some clarity the young man asked the monk two questions. The first question the young man asked was, before you became enlightened what did you do? The second question he asked was, after you became enlightened what did you do? Without hesitation the monk replied before I became enlightened I chopped wood and carried water. After I became enlightened, I chopped wood and carried water.

It must be early March and my craving of light and warmth, but lately I can't seem to think my way out of a paper bag. I feel like I have been wrestling with life like the angel Gabrielle who wrestled with Jacob and would not let him go. As it is written in Genesis:

Finally the angel Gabrielle said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Surely surviving a Nantucket winter shows we have striven with God and man and prevailed?

I have been struggling with everything I set out to do. Nothing is coming easy right now. Maybe that is what life is really. No matter if we are ready or not to face it, do what is asked of us, take our place in the order of things, we gather our resources and face what is ours to face, and each time we are changed, named slightly differently. It doesn't feel that way though. It feels like we have just mucked through another task and come out on the other end covered in muck, but when we have the courage to just do what is ours to do and to do it with all we have, even when what we have to give does not feel enough, even when the task we are doing feels without meaning, we are changed, we are grown, we are that much closer to our own enlightenment which is about staying with it all, being with each day, awake, with compassion, as present as we can muster, and walking into our lives and doing what is ours to do.

As UU Rev. James Ford writes,
The big it.
The deal for us, is to do it our way, each of us, our way.
But to do it.
To throw the doors of the heart wide.
And see what happens...

And it takes some heart, make no mistake, to just do what is right in front of us, what is right here to be done, the simple, unglamorous task of just facing the moment that our lives have created with courage and the will to do what is asked of us next, and to do even more than that, to do what is to be done with open-hearted

consciousness, to know that every moment that we engage with life with awareness, it changes us and the people who are touched by our lives.

Whether we are washing dishes, painting a room, cleaning a toilet, singing a song, buying groceries, pounding nails, organizing financial statements, rehearsing for a play: there is always this moment right before us waiting to be entered with awareness, with the consciousness that this moment will never come again and whether the task is easy or difficult, painful or unpleasant or joyous, it is ours to do and how we do it changes us.

On my recent trip to Costa Rica, it struck me that what is ours to do is dependent in part on where we live, with what level of comfort and technological access, in what climate, with what beliefs and stories that frame our existence, and give our lives meaning.

While in Costa Rica, I decided to start listing what people carried as a way to come to understand where I was and what mattered. It is of course not always the case that what we carry indicates what matters to us. Sometimes what we carry indicates where we are on the technological spectrum. We carry our children on bike handles until we attain bike seats or cars. So I do not mean to suggest that everything that we carry is a mirror to our souls. It is a mirror however to what is necessary for us to go on, however we go on.

I remember when my daughter was young I used to call her a bag lady because wherever she went she brought bags and bags of things, mostly books, stuffed animals, dolls, and various outfits for them to change into. These things were what she found essential to go on, to remain in the world and make sense of it too.

Here are some of the things Gary and I saw people carrying in Costa Rica:

A man with a chain saw on a horse's back, sugarcane: long and narrow in the heat over a man's back, a weed whacker and scythe on a bike, sticks for a cook fire in a wheel barrow, a steel ladder strapped to a motorcycle, a rosary, a baby in a bike basket in a christening dress, a live chicken held upside down by the feet on a bike handle.

And as we move into the technologically cluttered, we stop carrying so many of these things. We let automobiles carry for us; we let containers and baskets and taxis and boats carry for us. Our children we push in strollers or put in backpacks or bike seats, our laundry we wash and dry at home, our tools we put in trucks, our food in our cars or in sacks or carts that we push along.

I have been thinking that what we carry, whether we live on Nantucket or in Costa Rica, signifies something. It signifies what matters to us on some level, what we define as necessary, what we care about, what comforts us and reminds us of who we are, like my daughter's dolls and stuffed animals.

Pema Chodron, an ordained nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, author and teacher, writes about the soft spot in all of us and living with fear and uncertainty and learning how to love ourselves no matter where we are, learning how to enter our lives as they are.

We so often talk about what we care about, what we believe, what we want, what we want to create. But how often do we just take stock of where we are right now. Looking through the lens of what our lives reflect back to us?

Pema Codron goes on to say that it is between recognizing and fixing that peace resides. I am not suggesting that what we carry shows us to be shallow, disconnected Americans. I am suggesting that we stop and look, notice, wrestle for a moment with what our own lives reflect and come to some understanding of who we are and what we have to give to this life. What have we missed always striving for something more, always giving speeches in our heads or from our mouths about what is right and good and important and not taking the time, the simple time, to stop and see what our lives carry, how we are carried in our lives. *Not stopping to begin to carry our own lives with intention and care.*

And maybe all of this, all of this simple humanness is the point really, is why we have come...to strive and fail and open our hearts to each other in our messy humanity and strive and fail some more, to chop wood and carry water. It is not the doing that matters. It is how we do what we do that matters, with which intention, open-heartedness, awareness.

When we can just sit with who we are, just sit quietly not needing more or less than the truth of our lives- compassion is the outcome, for ourselves and others. Because we are all afraid of sitting with our lives without blinders or distraction. To just sit and be with our lives, nothing more or less, and to feel what is ours to feel and to keep going, to keep going toward knowing who we are to be good enough is in itself a radical action that has radical consequences.

To stand in the storm of life, which is a series of losses, and to stay awake and do what is ours to do, that changes everything, and changes us, grows us into warriors when a warrior is someone who can stand in the mundanity of all that is and know it all as a reflection of sacred truth.

Truth. Now there is a word with a punch. What is truth?

PATRICK LAUDE in his article *The Truth of Truths* tells us that the Greek word for truth, aletheia, evokes forgetting and slumber. The truth is that which cannot be utterly forgotten, although it may be veiled or concealed, and even temporarily put out of mind, because it is our very consciousness, or rather Consciousness itself. In Sanskrit the concept of truth is akin to sat, or being, and words having to do with truth such as sattva, saty graha, satsanga, etc., are all related to a sense of being.

The truth is essentially “that which is.” The Hebrew word for truth, Emet is formed from the first, middle, and last letters of the alphabet, and thereby symbolically embracing the whole of reality. As for Arabic, it stresses the aspect of the truth is al-haqq—which is also and above all one of the ninety-nine names of God, a word that denotes “right” and “justice.” The truth is right.

So we have truth as that which cannot be forgotten, that which is, the whole of reality and that which is right and just.

It strikes me that the truth is nothing more than a reflection of what is right here before us. It is finally what is necessary; it is what our being lives within and needs to survive, it is the essence of our lives, it is what we carry.

The late great Zen master, Suzuki Roshi, once said: “The most important thing is to find out the most important thing.” For me, the most important thing is asking the question, “Who or what am I, really?”

This is where we are with all of our stuff and all of our ways that connect us and keep us from ourselves and each other and now what? We are not going anywhere else. I am not willing to give up what I have, are you? And this life, these struggles with identity and duty and required tasks, this is what we have, this is our truth, and so how do we go on well, how do we create enough emptiness that we can still feel our lives and reach out to each other lives and be present? How do we create enough consciousness to keep recognizing that this is the life we have built and to respond daily and still find a space in which to view ourselves with some clarity, love, forgiveness, and hope.

How do we live into the truth of who we are and still know ourselves to be sacred beings of life?

Henry David Thoreau writes in his book *Walden*:

When my floor was dirty, I rose early, and, setting all my furniture out of doors on the grass, bed and bedstead making but one budget, dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white; and by the time the villagers had broken their fast the morning sun had dried my house sufficiently to allow me to move in again, and my meditations were almost uninterrupted. It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories.

They seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in. I was sometimes tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there. It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves

are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads—because they once stood in their midst.

This is what we must do with the contents of our lives, take them outdoors into the sunlight and look them all over and see not only what is not good enough but what is more than good enough, a reflection of who we are, and in that reflection see the truth of our lives and so live into each moment, and so carry all that is ours with awareness and come to embody the courage and simplicity of this frail life with us into the world with softer judgments of others and ourselves, with hearts that open with less difficulty and pain, with a quietude of mind that allows to see ourselves as we are and then others as they are: human beings walking through life with as much hope and awareness as we can muster, longing for certainty, carrying frailty, waiting to be recognized as fellow travelers, no matter what we carry.

Amen.